

## Why Is My Meyer Lemon Tree Dropping Its Leaves?

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Sept. 13, 2019

Q: My Meyer lemon is about seven feet tall and is covered with small, green fruit, but it has lost most of its leaves. What should I do?

A: Citrus tend naturally to drop some leaves during blossoming and fruit formation, but the tree should not drop the majority of its leaves during this time. Some common causes of leaf drop include high heat and wind, nutrient deficiencies, overly dry or salty soils.

Is the tree in a pot? If so, has it been allowed to dry out recently? Another possibility is the tree has root rot. This is most likely if you're watering too frequently or the drainage of the soil site or container is poor.



Meyer lemons (Photo: Special to the Democrat)

To get the reason behind your tree's loss of leaves, you may have to consider a process of eliminating causes for the leaf drop. For instance if you fertilize the tree regularly then you could rule out a nutrient deficiency. If leaves are starting to grow back, you can rule out root rot or salty soils as the cause, so keep a lookout for developing buds, which will be the first sign of recovery. When the tree drops leaves due to high heat or water stress, as long as conditions return to normal, the tree

will start to grow new leaves within a couple of weeks.



A basket of Meyer lemons. (Photo: Sharon Rigsby)

Citrus trees are heavy feeders so you may not be fertilizing it enough. Lemon trees and most citrus that have a foliage diameter of 15 to 20 feet should be fertilized with one pound of actual nitrogen per year. So for example, if you are using ammonium sulfate fertilizer that has 20% nitrogen you would use 5 pounds of this fertilizer per year.

For smaller trees you would reduce the fertilizer dosage proportionally based on the foliage diameter of the tree. It is best to split this fertilizer up into small applications each month during the growing season, early spring through late summer. Too much nitrogen fertilizer applied at one time in the summer can contribute to thick rinds and lower juice content in

oranges and grapefruits.



A Meyer lemon tree branch in full bloom. (Photo: Celia Casey/News Journal correspondent)

Fertilizing in the fall can cause new growth that makes the tree more susceptible to frost damage. Fertilizer should be applied from the trunk out to the drip line all around the tree and then watered in immediately. Ammonium sulfate should not be used if your soil has a pH less than 6 as it will make the soil even more acid.

Trees in pots will need a more complete fertilizer with phosphorus, potassium and micronutrients included, such as one of the slow release fertilizers.

The tree may also benefit from mulching as this will reduce water loss from the soil and prevent soil from drying out too quickly, and it may also help to suppress some of the common root rots such as phytophthora.

University research has shown a reduction of root rot in both citrus and avocado trees if the soil organic matter content is above 7% organic matter. Amending the soil with alfalfa meal and other decaying organic matter has also been shown to help reduce root rots due to the higher concentration of ammonia gases produced by the decomposing material.

*The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email [mastergardener@shastacollege.edu](mailto:mastergardener@shastacollege.edu). The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.*